DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 172 904 **PS 010 630**

AUTHOR	Solis, Faustina
TITLE	Family Under Stress.
PUB DATE	Mar 79
NOTE	11p.; Paper presented at the CAEYC Conference (San Diego, California, March 31, 1979) ; Not available in paper copy due to print quality
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Economic Disadvantagement; Family (Sociological Unit); *Family Characteristics; Family Income; *Family Role; Family Structure; Guaranteed Income; Individual Power; Parent Responsibility; Parents; *Public Support; *Social Change; Social Influences; *Social Responsibility; Stress Variables; Technology
IDENTIFIERS	*Rights of Children

ABSTRACT

This paper briefly explores current assumptions about the structure and functions of the modern American family and indicates new social, economic and psychological forces which are influencing parents. Also suggested are areas of concern related to the provision of family support services. (RH)

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FAMILY UNDER STRESS

Most societies have attempted to maintain harmony between human relationships and the environment in order to afford protection and nurturing for healthy development of their young. In fact children have been burdened with physical and emotional stresses beyond their ability to understand and sometimes withstand. Essentially they have been powerless within the social, economic, and environmental structures which determine their destiny. They remain dependent on us, their society, to be mindful of their value. Despite the technological and economic advances that have been attained, children and families have had mounting insecurities and barriers for fulfilling theirs and society's expectations.

In the absence of national policies for children and families, we must direct thoughtful and honest inquiries as to the meaning and the value that children actually have in our society. Frequently occurrences in our communities would attest to value differences in the perception of children.

Needless to say, to explore the social and economic impact of all of the forces which touch children in America is a major undertaking and I doubt that task can ever be accomplished to the satisfaction of any one segment of the society.

Today, in considering the parameters of stress we will address the family for 98% of children in this country growing up in families. Whatever happens to families determines the fate of our children. To understand, support and develop policies and programs concerning children requires supporting families in the same way that to understand the development of children requires an understanding of the lives of parents.

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Let us consider first some broad assumptions that are often harbored by the general public and by those persons and individuals responsible for the direction of programs. As a matter of fact these outdated ideas hinder the development of constructive policies and attitudes. Until policy makers, planners and those who day-by-day provide services which touch families, give serious consideration to the way broad social and economic forces affect families, we will be unable to do much more than help individuals repair damage that the environment and our social structures continue to inflict upon them.

First of all, there appears to be some reluctance to accept the fact that the family in America has been in the process of change in its composition and its function for some years. The assumption is made that these changes constitute a collapse or destruction of family life. Yet we have to recognize that families in the past have never totally conformed to the traditional image of the ideal two-parent unit.

During the 19th century the ideal family was defined as one who accepted the basic attributes of self sufficiency and independence. It was believed that a family could achieve economic and social independence if it exerted sufficient effort. Those who could not live up to this standard came to feel inadequate and perhaps guilty. The measurement of individual or family self sufficiency was a very powerful influence of feelings of adequacy.

Many historical changes have made this ideal an obsolete concept. Work and the production of the necessities of life are

no longer the major responsibilities of the home. Children who once assumed an economic role in the family now represent an expense: As children have become more dependent, child rearing is considered economically an unproductive job. Functions that were once performed by the family have been increasingly turned over to professionals as industrial and technological development raised expectations and possibilities, thus the content and nature of family life has changed. In recent years a number of family models have emerged. Notwithstanding these new modalities, two children out of three are still raised in a two parent family. The third child more often than not is raised by one parent and even if it is a single parent it constitutes a family, not necessarily a broken or inadequate family but surely a different family composition.

Despite all of the social and economic turmoil confronting American society at the time, the majority of parents are doing the best job possible in the face of numerous pressures. New support for these families must grow out of rethinking our traditional definition of families and the public policies that are based on those definitions. Families never were as self sufficient or as self contained as they may have seemed to be but today they are even less. They are extraordinarily dependent on outside forces of influences ranging from the nature of parents work to the content of television programming; from the structure of local schools to the organization of health care. Parents are competing on unequal terms with institutions on which they must depend or which have taken over their traditional functions.

The statistics which reflect changing patterns of family life include declining birth rates, increase in divorce rates, millions of children, as indicated earlier, spending their childhood in single parent families, an increasing proportion of children to teenage mothers who are often poor and sometimes unmarried, and perhaps the most important fact of all, the rapidly growing number of mothers married and unmarried who now seek employment outside of the home. In today's world parents cannot have and often do not want exclusive supervision of their young. What is being asked is that there be an effort on the part of the American people to face the real facts of changes in family life -- that there are indeed understandable, economic and psychological reasons for women to engage in work out of the home or to remain at home; that divorce rates reflect structural, social changes rather than merely moral ways; that most Americans marry and most marriages produce children, and that most divorced people will remarry in time and that parents will continue to have primary responsibility for raising and rearing their children.

Parents have had to adopt another role in choosing, meeting, talking with and coordinating the professionals, the technology and the institutions that help raise their children. Only parents are in a position to consider each influence in terms of a particular child and to judge how these outside or multiple influences interact. If parents are frustrated it is no wonder; they have the responsibility for their children's lives yet they rarely have the voice, authority or the power to make others listen to them.

All families today need new support in raising children. Parents still have primary responsibility for raising children and most accept it willingly, though they must have the power to do so in ways consistent with their children's needs and their own values. We must guard against overly criticizing parents themselves and address ourselves to the reform of the institutions that ignore the family's self-esteem, or challenge their right to power, equal opportunity and equality.

There is another assumption that equal opportunity is in place. We have been taught to think of a society as one fundamentally open to success through hard work and ability. Personal characteristics such as effort, talent, aspiration and ambition are thought to determine the position of respect, power, and wealth ultimately achieved by any individual. This assumption denies that the circumstance of birth, the social, economic and/or ethnic heritage into which a child is born has much more to do with determining individual standing and success. The most basic error in the assumption of equal opportunity is that achieving it could not lessen the inequality of condition much less place the base of a decent standard of living. Distribution of the rewards as distinct from opportunity to compete for the reward is far more unequal than our national self-image seems to imply.

The top fifth of American families receives approximately 41% of all family income. The bottom fifth receives approximately 5.4% and census bureau studies as well as studies using other data revealed that it has been the pattern with little changes since the end of World War II.

In relying on schools to give children the inspiration and the tools to overcome their backgrounds, we have mistakenly charged the schools with changing those children who are born disadvantaged while avoiding the more important task of changing the discrimination and structural forces that keep them that way. Schools can indeed contribute to the goal of equal opportunity by teaching the basic cognitive skills to all children and increase the opportunities open to those excluded but what they cannot do is eliminate discrimination in the job market or provide employment opportunity, adequate housing, access to health care, and other services.

These children need to see their parents and their older siblings having access to jobs, a decent income, and necessary services for them to believe that indeed there is a promise in the future.

Technology: American attitudes toward the rapid techological changes of modern society is that there are some environmental and social costs to these developments, the advantages and progress they represent are (and will continue to be) mostly beneficial; second, that in any case, individuals and families have the option in a free market system of accepting or rejecting the products of modern technology according to their own values.

It is necessary to examine the benefits and risks to children of three products of technological advance: television, food treatments, and nuclear energy. In no case is it clear what steps will be best for children, and what the responsibilities of family and government power ought to be in respect to control of technology. Perhaps there should be expanded consumer information and organization, encouraging the social

responsibility of corporations, and for the creation of more effective governmenc agencies to evaluate, consider, and guard against potential hazards. In the end, the fate of children and families is clearly linked to society's ability to use technology constructively and carefully.

The Carnegie Council on children in its public policy consideration stated, "We believe that parents are still the world's greatest experts about the needs of their own children. Virtually any private or public program that supports parents, effectively supports children. This principle of supporting family vitality seems to us preferable to any policy that would have the state provide children directly with what it thinks they need."

Consideration needs to be given to the following: 1) Jobs and a decent income. The greatest single harm to children is poverty. It is important that a combined program of jobs and income supports which would require that parents able to work do so and would assure a modest net income for all families and children. This would view the care of children as a legitimate work choice for parents and assure for some of them a "living" income to those parents who make that choice. 2) There have been inequities in employment practices for racial minorities and women. 3) Two special groups of children need attention in an income support program. First the children of single parents must be guaranteed adequate child support. The second group are children with handicapping conditions who require extraordinary expenses beyond what a family service system or the individual family can possibly provide. 4) Flexible working conditions -

Then with jobs of income support the problem of working out responsibilities of parenthood and paid remains for all employed parents. Conflicts between the demands of the job and the needs of children should not always be settled in favor of the job. Business and government policies influencing work structure already have made a deep influence on American families. Thoughtful and conscious policies to assure a more beneficial influence on children and family life are necessary.

There can be better use of flexible daily, weekly, and annual work schedules as well as accomodations to life cycle patterns which will permit years of time to be taken out without damaging careers. Pregnancy leave should not only be protected but also expanded. Employees should be required to grant mothers or fathers leaves of absence to be used in a proportion they choose before and after the birth of a baby without their loosing their seniority, privileges of advancement, or job security.

I would like to address at this point the matter of rights in relation to the family, the rights of children in a family, children's right in respect to health care, school, and jobs, children's right in a technological society.

Laws should have as an objective the maintenance of a family's integrity and to offering help and services to tie the members over in crisis. Children should not be removed from home at either the court's request or a parents without a clear showing that the child would be really better off elsewhere and that less drastic solutions such as psycho-therapy or special education would not relieve the problem. We have not sufficiently

explored the general concerns of rebellious or runaway children and this needs continued study.

Public workers authorities as well as providers of care will need to be held accountable for the neglect and use of children in their care as we would like to hold parents responsible. Until recently children who were in public and private institution had little if any rights at all. There is a need for laws and protections for such children.

We need to develop legal ways to protect children from the assaults of the technological environment. After-the-fact damage suits are frequently impossible and are in any case cold comfort.

Never have the roles and the rights of children and families been as unclear as in our comtemporary society. We profess to be a child loving and a child oriented society, yet the health and social supports for children in this country, particularly poor children, children with mental and physical handicapping conditions, and socially and physically abused children has not reached the level of other industrialized societies. Since the turn of the century major legislation on behalf of children beginning with the formation of the National Child Labor Committee has been enacted amidst heated controversy. The establishment of the Children's Bureau in 1912, the Sheppard-Towner Act for grants in aid to states for the development of maternal and infant health care programs in the 1920's and Title V of the Social Security Act of 1935, followed by special program legislation such as nutritional programs, community mental health services, child care programs, all have experienced nearly overwhelming barriers to their implementation.

It is because of the continuous difficulty accompanying efforts to upgrade services for families that child advocacy on a broader scale is being strengthened. This should not be solely a parental concern. The children of this country are our responsibility as well, in that we contribute through our indifference or positive participation to the quality of their developing society.

Faustina Solis, Associate Professor
University of California, San Diego
CAEYC Conference
San Diego, CA
March 31, 1979